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Rep. Michele Bachmann continues to spurn earmarks, but that doesn't mean the Sixth District is getting left out.

Sens. Al Franken and Amy Klobuchar have included the St. Cloud area in their requests for more than half a billion dollars worth of earmarks for fiscal year 2011, which begins Oct. 1.

Earmarks are specific funding requests lawmakers make, usually for projects in their district. The funding comes through spending bills approved by House and Senate appropriations committees.

Earmark debate

Over the years, earmarking has ballooned, rising from just a dozen funding requests in 1970 to more than 2,000 by 2005, according to an analysis by Taxpayers for Common Sense, a government watchdog group.

For the 2010 fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, lawmakers approved earmark funding for 9,129 projects worth \$16.5 billion, according to Citizens Against Government Waste, a watchdog group that maintains an earmark database and annually publishes a "Pig Book," highlighting earmarks the group deems most wasteful.

Minnesota was granted \$67.3 million in earmark funding for fiscal 2010, according to CAGW, and has received more than \$1.06 billion over the decade.

Critics label earmarks as "pork" - a wasteful and corruption-prone appropriation of taxpayers' money.

They also say the practice drains funding for other needs.

Supporters say earmarks benefit communities.

Many earmarks go toward road and water projects, and some bolster university research.

While the total spending was a 15.5 percent reduction from what was spent the previous year, the 2010 numbers show that "most members of Congress still aren't willing to eliminate the practice and why meaningful reform is needed," said CAGW president Tom Schatz.

This year's earmark totals could be significantly lower because of reforms.

In March, House Democratic leaders imposed a ban on earmarks for for-profit companies, and Republicans adopted a one-year moratorium.

All three Minnesota Republicans - Reps. Bachmann, John Kline of Lakeville and Eric Paulsen of Eden Prairie - are honoring the moratorium.

This is the fourth year Kline has declined to seek earmark funding.

Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense, which advocates the elimination of earmarks, called the reforms "incremental progress," though progress nonetheless.

Ellis said his group objects to earmarks because the process subverts the merit system and breeds corruption.

"You can have a good project that's funded by earmarks, but we don't know if it's the best project because (earmarking) is a political muscle system rather than a merit system," Ellis said.

Bachmann says she determined after her first year in Congress that the earmark process was corrosive and decided not to seek funding for her district in spending bills.

But she has in the past sought money for transportation projects as part of the bill that authorizes spending for transportation.

This year, she withdrew her requests in honor of the moratorium.

Bachmann said in a recent interview that earmarks could become a moot issue for fiscal 2011 because the House has failed to adopt a budget resolution that set spending limits for each of the 12 appropriations bills.

"If you don't have spending bills, you can't have earmarks," Bachmann said, "but we'll see."

What Bachmann and others view as wasteful spending, other lawmakers see as support for worthy endeavors.

"Congressional appropriations help fund important projects in local communities," Klobuchar said. "Good area projects I have successfully sponsored include the Northstar commuter rail line, the Stearns County Domestic Violence Court and the Minnesota National Guard's groundbreaking 'Beyond the Yellow Ribbon' program."

St. Cloud proposals

Klobuchar's 2011 earmark requests total more than \$563.8 billion and include \$25 million for Northstar, \$400,000 for the Stearns County court and \$2 million for the Yellow Ribbon military reintegration program.

The first-term senator also is asking for \$6.7 million for 11 projects in St. Cloud, including \$1.5 million for the St. Cloud Area Planning Organization for road projects, \$1.5 million to upgrade the St. Cloud water treatment plant, \$1 million for runway lighting at St. Cloud Regional Airport, and \$100,000 for two large Metro Bus buses. Sen. Al Franken is seeking \$500,000 for the regional airport lighting project and \$2 million for the St. Cloud planning organization's road projects.

Overall, Franken is asking for \$589 million.

Both of Bachmann's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party challengers say that if elected, they would be more flexible on earmarks than the incumbent.

"The problem with earmarks is transparency," said Maureen Reed in a statement. "If there is a worthy project that needs to be funded outside normal funding procedures, and it is conducted in the light of day, I would be open to supporting it."

State Sen. Tarryl Clark said in a statement that while she recognizes the potential for abuse in the earmarking system, "our taxpayers deserve to see those hard-earned dollars invested back into their own district, in ways that not only improve the community, but create jobs and improve infrastructure for our local businesses."

On the lookout

Beginning last year, lawmakers were required to post their requests for earmark funding on their House and Senate office websites. Among Minnesota's House members:

Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minneapolis, is asking for \$305.5 million for 65 projects.

Rep. Betty McCollum, D-St. Paul, wants \$103.7 million for 33 projects.

Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Detroit Lakes, is requesting \$43.3 million for 26 projects.

Rep. James Oberstar, D-Chisholm, is seeking \$210 million for 55 projects.

Rep. Tim Walz, D-Mankato, is asking for \$134 million for 42 projects.

The debate over earmarks intensified after disclosure in 2005 of Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens' attempt to get a \$230 million earmark for what was dubbed a "bridge to nowhere."

That same year, earmarks were at the heart of the scandal involving Rep. Randy Cunningham of California, who pleaded guilty to accepting bribes and was sentenced to eight years in prison.

Since then, watchdog groups and lawmakers have called for reform in the earmarking process, if not outright elimination.

If President Barack Obama had his way, he would go line-by-line through the budget, striking out those funding items he felt were wasteful.

Other presidents have also sought line-item veto power, but the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that unconstitutional.

Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., has sponsored legislation to give Obama that authority.

Feingold also is a co-sponsor of legislation that would require all earmarks to be put into a database that would be available for public scrutiny.

The measure is aimed at building more transparency and openness into the process.

Ellis said Taxpayers for Common Sense supports both measures and is particularly enthusiastic about the database's potential.

He said it would enable the public to determine what actually gets funded among the tens of thousands of requests that lawmakers make every year.

"Our goal this year is to try to bridge that gap so we can directly relate a request to an award," Ellis said.

Oberstar, chairman of the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, asserted that Democrats have taken the lead on earmark reform since gaining control of the House in 2006. But he bristles at the term "earmark."

"I prefer to use the term 'constituent-inspired funding,'" Oberstar said.

"Some have pointed to abuses of the system and called for the practice to be banned," Oberstar said. "This is a short-sighted approach that ultimately leaves citizens with a government that is less responsive to their needs."